

# The UK and EU Foreign and Security Policy: An Optional Extra

RICHARD G. WHITMAN

## Abstract

Foreign and security policy were not areas in which Prime Minister Cameron was seeking to renegotiate the relationship between the UK and the European Union (EU), but security may be a key issue in the EU referendum. The untangling of Britain's foreign and security policy from the EU following a Brexit vote would be relatively uncomplicated. The EU's arrangements for collective foreign and security policy, the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), are conducted on an intergovernmental basis which allows the UK to preserve independence in its diplomacy while allowing for the coordination of policy where interests are held in common with other member states. The UK retains substantial diplomatic and military capabilities which would allow it to continue to pursue a separate national foreign, security and defence policy in the case of either a 'Leave' or 'Remain' outcome.

**Keywords:** UK, EU, foreign policy, defence, CFSP, CSDP

## Introduction

SECURITY has already taken on a central role in the EU referendum debate. Prime Minister David Cameron has been keen to make a connection in the public mind between EU membership and national security, as indicated by speeches and statements that he has made since the opening of the formal stage of renegotiations on a new UK–EU relationship last autumn.<sup>1</sup> The case for retaining membership as the best vehicle for the UK's national security has also been supported by key international figures, including President Obama and Jens Stoltenberg, NATO Secretary General, allowing remain campaigners to highlight how a Brexit might undermine other relationships central to UK national security.

In his renegotiation of the terms of EU membership, Prime Minister Cameron did not mention EU foreign and security policies. This is already an area in which the UK is able to preserve autonomy uncomplicated by binding EU policy commitments that intrude on national foreign, security and defence policy. Consequently, the untangling of Britain's foreign and security policy from the EU's

Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) following a Brexit vote would be relatively uncomplicated. Further, it is an area in which the costs of a Brexit could fall more heavily on the EU than the UK, as the loss of a member state with significant diplomatic and military resources would diminish the collective capabilities at the disposal of EU foreign and defence policies.

In what follows, it will be argued that security and defence is an area in which the impact of a vote to leave the EU would be relatively marginal. Because cooperation in this area is intergovernmental, disentangling the UK would be relatively straightforward. And because of the limited impact that EU policies have achieved in this area, it is an open question as to whether Britain's global role would suffer unduly as a result.

## The UK's international presence

The UK is, alongside France, one of the European Union's two most powerful and ambitious states when it comes to foreign and defence policies. The UK remains one of the globally significant states. Its gross

domestic product (GDP) was globally ranked fifth in 2014 by the IMF, after those of the US, China, Japan, and Germany. Even with the global financial crisis and the economic growth of the BRIC states (Brazil, Russia, India and China), the UK has the sixth highest military expenditure after the US, China, Russia, Saudi Arabia and France, according to SIPRI. The UK hosts a major international financial centre in the City of London; the pound sterling is a major internationally traded currency; and the UK hosts a major defence industry which makes the UK the sixth most important arms exporter according to SIPRI figures.

Within the EU the UK is also one of the EU's 'big three'—alongside France and Germany—by size of population and economy. It is one of the EU's major diplomatic and military powers, accounting for, again according to SIPRI, 20.8 per cent of the EU member states' total military expenditure, compared to 21.4 per cent for France and 16 per cent for Germany. As one of the EU's two permanent members of the UN Security Council, and also both a G8 and G20 member, it is at the centre of a number of internationally significant organisations. It is also a founding member of NATO and a nuclear state. The UK is the EU's largest provider of overseas development assistance (ODA) and second only to the United States internationally, retaining its commitment of 0.7 per cent of GDP expenditure despite austerity over the past five years. Britain also retains one of the EU member states' most extensive diplomatic networks (with slightly fewer embassies than France and slightly more than Germany) and has increased the total number of its embassies in recent years. This is despite the creation of a diplomatic service for the EU that will be outlined below. The UK also possesses a network of soft power resources utilising its linguistic and cultural power through the Commonwealth and British Council.

In recent years, British foreign and security policy has been confronted with a significant set of challenges. Broader structural shifts within international relations are taking place alongside considerable volatility in the UK's European neighbourhood. Management of this change and complexity are key challenges for the UK's foreign and security policy. This

changing structure of international affairs—with the rise of new actors such as China and other BRICs—has combined with the recent global financial crisis (and its attendant austerity) to raise questions about the place of the UK in international relations.

Over the past five years, Britain's diplomacy and defence have become more financially constrained. The UK's defence budget has been cut in real terms by 19 per cent and the foreign affairs budget by 16 per cent. Even with this difficult financial climate, the British government has not looked to the EU or its member states to develop the pooling and sharing of diplomatic or defence resources. Reductions in spending on diplomacy have also been accompanied by a 'network shift' to reallocate the UK's diplomatic power to the emerging economies and rising countries, and reduce staff and close diplomatic posts outside capital cities in Europe. Adding Brexit to this mix of challenges would generate yet more uncertainty.

## The EU in the UK's foreign and security policy

The UK's approach to the development of a European foreign and security and defence policy has been broadly supportive of greater *intergovernmental* coordination of national foreign policies. It has also been resistant to the notion that UK foreign policy should be constrained by institutional or decision-making arrangements that would limit national foreign policy prerogatives.

The UK's membership of the EU is a constituent part of Britain's national foreign and security policy. Through its membership of the EU, the UK is also a participant in the European Union's external relations policies, which encompass foreign policy, security, defence, trade and development. Consequently, the UK pursues a national foreign and security policy which seeks to advance the UK's own national interest while simultaneously contributing, with other EU member states, to the process of making and implementing the EU's foreign and security policies. Therefore a decision to leave the EU, following the referendum vote in June 2016, would have broader implications for Britain's place within international relations.

Understanding the UK's current perspective on EU foreign and security policy requires a broader horizon to understand the adjustment that Britain has been making to its place in the world over the last seventy years. The UK has become a postimperial power after embarking on a decolonisation process. Its geopolitical footprint has progressively shrunk as it has lost direct control of overseas territory, reduced the size of its armed forces and shrunk its military bases overseas. An echo of the colonial period endures with the British Overseas Territories (BOTs), over which the UK still exercises sovereignty and through which it retains responsibility for places around the world as far-flung as Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean and islands in the Caribbean and the South Atlantic. It is also in possession of military bases across Europe, in Cyprus, Germany and Gibraltar. During the Cold War, Britain saw itself as a key European player, but shifted from a country predominantly concerned about the global balance of power to a country primarily focusing its security and defence policy on the North Atlantic area and the European continent, which was under Soviet threat.

Alongside such major structural changes, there have also been some strong elements of continuity, most notably in seeking to strike a balance between Europe and the United States. The UK's 'special relationship' with the United States—covering intelligence, defence and diplomatic cooperation—remains a central component of Britain's foreign and security policy. From the early 1960s, Britain also sought to participate directly in Europe's political and economic integration project by seeking membership of the European Economic Community (EEC). The relationship between the US and European strands of UK foreign policy has also been at the heart of different visions of Britain's place in the world. The point of departure for most discussions on Britain's international role post-Second World War has been Winston Churchill's vision of the UK as a necessary part of three circles: the Community of Europe (seeing Britain as a part of Europe but not a participant in European integration); the Empire and the Commonwealth; and the Anglosphere. The notion that Britain needs to rebalance these

three circles has been stressed recently by advocates of a UK exit from the European Union. They stress the opportunities that exist through a reinvigoration of links with the Commonwealth and the 'Anglosphere'. Successive British governments have sought to retain a close relationship with the United States to preserve international influence. A less prominent strand of thinking has been that the UK needs to rebalance its relationship with the US by focusing on a deeper form of foreign policy cooperation within the EU.

Even without a Brexit, the current and previous Conservative-led governments have sought to recalibrate Britain's place in the world to 'de-centre' the EU from the UK's foreign policy. In response to the rise of emerging powers—as well as to shifts in the global political economy giving a greater prominence to China and Asia—the UK government has placed greater emphasis on the UK as a 'networked' foreign policy actor, for whom the EU is only one network of influence. The most recent strategy statements that guide the UK government's foreign, security and defence policy clearly demonstrate this position. The 2015 *National Security Strategy* (NSS) and *Strategic Defence and Security Review* (SDSR) documents place the EU in a minor supporting role in the UK's defence and security.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's *Single Departmental Plan* places the EU in a subordinate rather than a central place in British diplomacy.<sup>3</sup>

## The UK and the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy

As stated above, there are a number of different strands to the EU's external relations. Each of these has different policy-making arrangements and different forms of implementation. Foreign policy was not a component of the EU's founding treaties and only emerged as an informal process of collective consultation between member states in the early 1970s. This foreign policy consultation process was originally known as European Political Cooperation (EPC) and progressively developed with arrangements for decision-making and implementation that were

separate from the policies and practices developed under the European Community.

Foreign policy coordination was revamped and made a constituent part of the European Union in 1993, with the coming into force of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). The CFSP has the purpose of coordinating the foreign policies of the member states. It remains different from other areas of EU policy as each member state has the ability to veto any collective decision, so policy-making is normally described as *intergovernmental*, rather than based on the *community method* of decision-making in which the European Commission proposes policy which is co-legislated by the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament. The EU's High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice President of the European Commission (HR/VP), currently Federica Mogherini, takes the lead in steering the EU's collective foreign policy on behalf of the member states and coordinating this with the EU's other 'external action' activity (as it is described in EU-speak), such as trade and development policy. To assist the HR/VP in her role there is the European External Action Service (EEAS). The EEAS is a diplomatic service populated by European civil servants and seconded national diplomats. While based in Brussels, it operates a network of EU delegations (which enjoy a similar status to embassies) in third countries.

The Foreign Affairs Council (FAC), composed of member states' foreign (and sometimes development, defence and trade) ministers, meets at least monthly to discuss and take decisions on common foreign policy positions and to adopt measures, such as sanctions, to give effect to foreign policy decisions.<sup>4</sup> The FAC is also responsible for taking decisions to launch crisis management activities under the Common Security and Defence Policy. As well as chairing the FAC, the HR/VP represents the EU's collective foreign policy positions to third countries and conducts diplomacy on behalf of the member states. These member states appoint ambassadors to a Political and Security Committee (PSC) (chaired by representatives from the EEAS) which provide oversight of the day-to-day operations of the EU's foreign, security and defence policies as well as

providing policy options for consideration by the FAC.

The CFSP's achievements to date remain rather modest and mixed, as the European Council on Foreign Relations' annual *EU Foreign Policy Scorecard* illustrates.<sup>5</sup> Recent successes include the EU's participation in the Iran nuclear diplomacy process and brokering agreement between the Kosovan and Serbian governments to normalise their relations. Yet these must be set against less positive outcomes in Ukraine, Syria and Libya.

British governments have been comfortable with the intergovernmental nature of the CFSP since its creation. Proposals to reform the CFSP—such as introducing qualified majority voting for decision-making—have been opposed by successive British administrations irrespective of their political composition. Where reforms have been agreed to the CFSP under the Amsterdam, Nice and Lisbon Treaties, Britain has held a consistent position in preserving the central role and veto power of member states, resisting the 'communitisation' of the CFSP by keeping the European Commission from assuming a leading role in initiating policy proposals and seeking to improve the effectiveness of the CFSP via greater use of the EU's own financial resources and power as a trading bloc.

The British government assessed its own participation in the CFSP positively in the *Review of the Balance of Competences* exercise undertaken under the 2010–15 Coalition government.<sup>6</sup> The foreign policy report summarised the expert evidence that it received with the assessment that it is 'generally strongly in the UK's interests to work through the EU in foreign policy'. It argued that several benefits accrue from the increased impact of acting in concert with twenty-seven other countries: greater influence over non-EU powers, derived from our position as a leading EU country; the international weight of the EU's single market, including its power to deliver commercially beneficial trade agreements; the reach and magnitude of EU financial instruments, such as those for development and economic partnerships; the range and versatility of the EU's tools, as compared with other international organisations; and the EU's perceived political neutrality, which enables it to act in

some cases where other countries or international organisations might not.

Most academics and analysts view the UK as an important player within the CFSP and as playing a positive role in seeking to build consensus on European foreign policy positions. The UK is also viewed as a member state which is consistently resistant to any moves to restrict national autonomy in foreign policy-making. It has been interested in reforms to EU foreign policy that would increase its visibility and coherence but does not accept the proposition that member states should converge on a 'single' foreign policy that would replace those of the member states.

## The UK and the CSDP

The EU embarked on its own defence policy in the early 1990s when the member states collectively agreed to create a common defence policy. The CSDP, like the CFSP, is an area of intergovernmental cooperation between the EU's member states. The CSDP has different ambitions and purposes from NATO. NATO provides for the collective defence of its members and brings the military capabilities of the United States together with twenty-seven other states into a transatlantic military alliance organised and prepared to fight military adversaries. In contrast, the CSDP focuses on preventing, managing and resolving conflict using both military and civilian resources. The range of roles that the EU and its member states seek to undertake collectively are known as the 'Petersberg tasks'. These roles include providing peacekeeping forces; providing security for elections to take place in states in conflict; training police, armed forces and security personnel in third countries; and monitoring disputed borders, ceasefires and peace agreements. Since 2003, thirty missions have been launched in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the western Balkans, eastern Europe and the Caucasus.<sup>7</sup> The CSDP is also intended to enhance the collective capabilities of member state armed forces by coordinating military procurement and enhancing interoperability by developing joint military forces capable of undertaking Petersberg missions. The CSDP relies upon the member states to commit their own forces voluntarily

to the operations as the EU does not possess a defence budget. British governments have, however, been more keen on building bilateral defence relationships (outside the EU framework) with France, Germany and Poland.

The UK can lay claim to a leading role in the CSDP. The EU's ambitions for a defence policy, set out in the Maastricht Treaty (TEU), were rather directionless until the 1998 Anglo-French summit in St Malo, where Tony Blair and Jacques Chirac agreed to a push for greater EU defence capabilities. As the EU's two most capable military powers, the UK–French agreement laid the ground for what was to become the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy.

Since this time, the UK has shifted from leader to laggard in terms of its support for the development and substantiation of an EU defence policy. Indeed, the CSDP has not been a core component of British security and defence planning over the last decade. The UK's most recent five-yearly Strategic Defence and Security Review made no reference to the CSDP as a component of the UK's approach to providing for its national security and defence.

Relative to its size, the UK has been a very modest contributor to the military strand of the CSDP operations. It has generally had a preference for commitments through the framework of NATO. In contrast, it has committed personnel to the majority of the EU's 'civilian' missions deployed for roles such as border observation and capacity building for third countries. The civilian missions fit readily into the UK's development of the 'comprehensive approach' to international conflict management, which brings together diplomacy, defence and development resources to address the problems of failed and failing states. Independent analysts credit the UK with shaping the EU's agenda in this area.<sup>8</sup>

The main priority for UK defence and security in recent years has been recalibrating strategic choices following the withdrawal of military forces from Iraq and Afghanistan. A key concern has also been the UK's capacity for diplomatic influence and for influencing regional and international security in the context of diminishing public expenditure and the attendant



shrinkage of diplomatic and military resources. There has also been a growing caution around overseas intervention due to public and elite scepticism and weariness. This has not, however, lead to a greater enthusiasm for burden-sharing on defence or the pooling and sharing of military resources with other member states via the EU.

The Prime Minister attempted to set a new post-austerity direction for Britain's defence with the announcement of major increases in the UK defence budget last autumn. This included an unambiguous commitment to maintain spending at 2 per cent of GDP, which would increase the defence budget but would not fully reinstate cuts that have been made in recent years. The UK has made a number of major defence commitments, including renewal of the Trident nuclear weapon and submarine delivery system and two Queen Elizabeth-class aircraft carriers to be equipped with new F-35B fighter jet aircraft. Yet none of these decisions have been made with reference to military roles that might be undertaken by the UK through the EU. The UK has resisted proposals to deepen further the institutionalisation of European defence by giving the EU's European Defence Agency (EDA)—established in 2004 with a brief to improve European defence capabilities in the field of crisis management—a greater role or budget. The UK has also resisted the creation of a permanent military EU operational headquarters, an idea which is supported by a number of other EU member states including France and Germany.

Overall, a vote for a Brexit would be less disruptive for the UK's defence policy than for other aspects of Britain's EU membership. A Brexit would, however, place the UK's military capabilities further from the EU, and this is of especial relevance as the UK has tactical airlift and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities which are in short supply among the other member states. Indicative of UK assets made available to the EU's CSDP has been the provision of the operational headquarters (ONQ) for the EUNAVFOR anti-piracy operation off the coast of Somalia. This may no longer be available to the EU's CSDP, though it is conceivable that a deal might be struck.

## EU membership and foreign, security and defence policy

The argument that the EU is a positive 'net contributor' to the UK's national security has been advanced by the 'Remain' campaign. For Brexit campaigners, an exit from the EU would allow the UK freedom of choice to fully utilise its diplomatic and military capabilities alongside its soft power, its position as an unrivalled international financial centre and its memberships of the Anglosphere and the Commonwealth to seek new international influence, especially with rising powers. Brexit campaigners have already sought to downplay the EU's contribution to the UK's security by making the argument that it is NATO and the United States, not the EU, that has kept the peace in Europe since the Second World War. It also argues that EU defence policy has the ambition to create a 'Euro army' to replace national militaries.

A Brexit would, however, raise a broader set of questions for the UK. EU membership has been a key component of the UK's diplomacy and foreign policy since 1973. Alteration of that status would require an extensive recalibration of the UK's relationship with its European neighbours. Negotiating an exit from the EU itself would occupy extensive diplomatic and political bandwidth for an extended period (possibly for as long as a decade), which would then be unavailable to focus on the extensive and pressing set of security challenges currently faced by the UK. A key priority for British foreign policy for the two years following a Brexit vote would be to negotiate the UK's relationship with the EU as provided for under Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union.

The effects of Brexit would not be one-sided. The loss of one of the EU's 'big 3' member states would raise questions about the EU's capacity to weather the future, coming on the heels of the eurozone and migration crises. Non-European commentators would certainly question whether the EU was on the road to dissolution.

Less dramatically, the UK's voice as a key participant in the EU's collective foreign policy would be lost. As a country with a significant track record in international engagement and a range of diplomatic,

military, development and other foreign policy resources, the UK's support—or opposition—to the development of a collective system of EU foreign and security policy-making, and the pursuit of foreign policy initiatives, has a high degree of importance. In turn, the UK would lose the capacity to multiply its national foreign policy objectives through the EU and the consequent power that it enjoys in each of these areas.

UK bilateral relationships with other EU member states would be greatly complicated by a Brexit. The UK has invested particularly heavily in its relationship with France in recent years. The 2010 Lancaster House Treaties have created a new Anglo-French defence relationship rooted in collaboration on nuclear weapons technology and increased interoperability of armed forces. The treaties are premised on closer cooperation between the UK and France to facilitate greater burden-sharing in the EU and NATO. France has persisted with the idea of an Anglo-French coordination at the heart of a successful EU foreign, security and defence policy despite the reticence of recent British governments to develop an EU defence policy. With a UK EU exit, the rationale for even closer links between the UK and France would certainly diminish.

The UK would also face a major complication in the key transatlantic pillar of its foreign policy relationship with the United States. President Obama and other Administration officials have already expressed a clear preference for the UK to remain within the EU. An EU departure would be placing the UK in a contrary position to that of the long-term strategy of the United States. Both Democrat and Republican administrations have supported and promoted EU and NATO enlargements as key tenets of transatlantic relations over recent decades. Outside the EU, the UK would no longer have leverage on future enlargements of the EU or seeking to ensure that EU defence policies are developed in a manner that also strengthens NATO, rather than duplicates it. This reduction in leverage would mean that the UK would most certainly be considered of diminished significance to future US administrations. The special relationship might no longer be quite so special.

## Conclusion

The UK retains a substantial set of diplomatic and military capabilities which allow it to continue to pursue a national foreign, security and defence policy separate and separable from its membership of the EU. The EU's arrangements for collective foreign and security policy, the CFSP and the CSDP, are conducted on an intergovernmental basis which allows the UK to preserve national independence in its diplomacy while allowing for the coordination of policy where interests are held in common with the EU's other member states.

The UK can be described as a laggard, rather than a leader, in the EU's CSDP. Despite its position as one of the EU's two militarily significant member states, it has not sought to play a leading role in the development of a European Union defence policy. Britain has treated the CSDP as an optional extra for UK foreign, security and defence policy, rather than as central or integral.

The untangling of Britain's foreign and security policy from the EU's CFSP and CSDP following a Brexit vote would be relatively uncomplicated. The loss of a member state with the diplomatic and military resources of the UK would, however, diminish the capabilities that could be at the disposal of EU foreign and defence policy initiatives.

The impact of Brexit on the UK's broader international standing is more difficult to gauge. There would also be the need to reconfigure Britain's diplomatic relationship with the remaining member states if the UK was no longer a participant in the EU's collective multilateral decision-making. As the UK's neighbour, the EU would remain a central component of the UK's foreign and security policy after a Brexit. For the EU, the UK would have moved from being a participant in its foreign policy decision-making to being a subject of its diplomacy.

## Notes

- 1 It was a notable component of his remarks at the World Economic Forum in Davos on 21 January: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/davos-2016-prime-ministers-speech-to-the-world-economic-forum> (accessed 1 May 2016).

- 2 Her Majesty's Government, *National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015*, CM9161, London.
- 3 Foreign and Commonwealth Office's *Single Departmental Plan: 2015–2020*, which sets the vision and objectives for Britain's place in the world: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fco-single-departmental-plan-2015-to-2020/single-departmental-plan-2015-to-2020> (accessed 1 May 2016).
- 4 Which minister sits at the FAC meeting depends on the agenda issues under discussion.
- 5 <http://www.ecfr.eu/scorecard/2015> (accessed 1 May 2016).
- 6 HM Government, *Review of the Balance of Competence Report Auditing the UK's Relationship with the European Union: Foreign Policy*, 22 July 2013, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/227437/2901086\\_Foreign\\_Policy\\_acc.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/227437/2901086_Foreign_Policy_acc.pdf) (accessed 13 April 2016).
- 7 For an overview, see <http://www.eeas.europa.eu/csdp/missions-and-operations/> (accessed 1 May 2016).
- 8 S. Post, *Towards a Whole-of-Europe Approach: Organising the European Union's and the Member States' Comprehensive Crisis Management*, Springer, Wiesbaden, 2014. A. Wittkowsky and U. Wittkamp, *Pioneering the Comprehensive Approach: How Germany's Partners Do It*, ZIF, Center for International Peace Operations Policy Briefing, January 2013.